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Picture Values From An Artist's Viewpoint

By ROB WAGNER



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*One of a Series of Lectures Especially
Prepared for Student-Members
of The Palmer Plan*



PALMER PHOTOPLAY CORPORATION
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ROB WAGNER

MILLIONS of readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* are familiar with the series of articles dealing with motion picture studios and the making of photoplays that have come from Rob Wagner's pen from time to time. In gathering material for this work Mr. Wagner has become probably the most completely and variously informed man on the subject in the world. Few of his readers realize, however, the technical and scholastic training with which he was equipped when he first became interested in the screen. Graduating from the University of Michigan, as an engineer, in the class of 1895, Mr. Wagner was successively an illustrator on the *Detroit Free Press*, Art Editor of the *New York Criterion*, contributor to many magazines, chief illustrator for *Encyclopedia Britannica* in London and illustrator for *Historian's History of the World*, during which term of service he made over two thousand illustrations. At the age of thirty-two Mr. Wagner went to Paris to study at the Julian Academy and *Academie Delecluse*. Taking up the work of portrait painting, he won medals at two world fairs, his portrait of Stewart Edward White being medaled at San Francisco. In 1915 Mr. Wagner began his series of articles for the *Post*, nearly forty of which have appeared since. His book entitled "*Film Folk*" (Century Co.) has had a wide circulation. Recently Mr. Wagner has started writing for the screen, and motion picture theatre-goers will see many productions from his pen in the future. The following lecture deals with a subject that is of vital importance to all photoplaywrights, for, after all, the photoplay is a picture, and Mr. Wagner's views, backed by his training as an artist, possess peculiar value.

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WHEN the moving picture began, the marvel was not the picture, but the movement. Thus, in the early days, movement was the thing desired, and the more violent the movement the greater the triumph. In fact, this point was stressed to the extent of having curtains blow about and papers fly in all directions even in interior sets. Otherwise how should the spectator know this was a moving picture?

After, however, the people became adjusted to the fact that a new photographic phenomenon had arrived the possibilities of trick photography were so alluring that the first directors and cameramen could not resist the temptation to make this the major expression—back-action, dissolves, double exposures and all the stunts of the laboratory that cause eyes to pop out and nickels to drop in. These tricks, of course, were a mechanical triumph and had little to do with art. The cradle of the photodrama was entirely mechanistic and the nurse maids mostly mechanics.

The Dawn of Screen Drama.

Then came the great discovery that plays could be acted. Fire-runs, cowboys and explosions were interesting enough, but why not make them the thrills of a story? Needless to say, the character of these films was melodramatic, and during this brilliant period of the photodrama tumult and cataclysm held forth, the plot and the thrill—principally the thrill—holding first place in the producer's mind.

Thus it was that actors were called upon, and where should actors come from except the stage? And the technique contributed by this dramatic ravishment was of course that of the playhouse. What little manufac-

tured scenery that was found necessary was made by scenic artists, which interested as a novelty, but was soon discovered to be totally inadequate to the purpose. The stage has always been regarded as an artifice, yet the public mind looked upon moving pictures as realism. And so, though vibrant cloth scenery was acceptable in the playhouse, it outraged the sense of propriety in a realistic presentation.

Stage and Screen Technique.

There are several reasons why stage technique could not be translated to the screen: One was a matter of lighting and another of perspective. On the stage one may set a drop representing a woodland scene, and, with the cunning manipulation of lights, carry it from day-break to twilight with wondrous effect; whereas on the studio set, in the fierce white light of day, distant mountains painted on the canvas look only like little mountains close by—atmospheric perspective was utterly lacking.

Fundamentally, the stage and screen angles are absolutely reversed. In the playhouse the farther the actor comes down stage the wider it becomes, until, in the immensity of the proscenium arch, the contrast with his environment is tremendously exaggerated. The limitations of the playhouse also give rise to the necessity of painting interior sets in exaggerated perspective, and the men who had been trained in this kind of scenic representation found it difficult to adjust themselves to the building of sets in normal architectural proportions. The stage angle in the playhouse might be likened to a fan whose handle is way up stage and the ribs of which point toward the eyes of a thousand spectators distributed around the arc of a circular balcony. In the camera, however, this angle is reversed. There is but a single eye to behold the picture, and the handle of the fan would be in the lens with the ribs pointing out from it within an angle of about twenty or thirty degrees. Thus it is, as the performer comes forward, his stage becomes narrower, until,

in the semi-closeups, instead of having the full width of the proscenium he must confine his action to perhaps eight or ten feet. And so it gradually was borne in upon the producers that the moving picture was not simply a translation of stage craft to the screen, and that the words "canned drama" were a misnomer.

Birth of a New Art.

In the whole history of mankind we have no record of the birth of a new art. Music, sculpture, painting, dancing, dramatics and architecture are as old as man. So it was natural that the pioneers could not disassociate the moving picture from the other arts. They tried to translate the stage in which the spoken word is quite as essential as the action, and found that pantomimically the motion picture was inadequate to its translation. Therefore their next step was to invade literature; at least the printed story could be visualized. But here again it was found that this new expression had certain limitations and possibilities that did not inhere in the printed word. And thus, very reluctantly the impressarios of the cinema came finally to the understanding that a new art form had been born, borrowing a little from the other arts, but going directly to Nature for its greatest possibilities.

Photodrama Fundamentally Pictorial.

Strange as it may seem, in the first experiments the pictorial aspects of the cinema were woefully neglected, trick camera work, thrills and dramatic punch being the major considerations. But in its final analysis the photodrama is fundamentally pictorial, and when this discovery was made the cinema came into its own. For pictures are the symbols of a universal language that harks back to primitive man. For this reason a comedy made in Los Angeles is understood in Tibet, provided, of course, that the humor is universal rather than local. And thus it is that from Timbuctoo to Terra Haute, from Labrador to New South Wales, the world understands and laughs

at the classic comedy of Chaplin. With the realization that the picture was of prime importance, producers immediately set out to fill the eye. Great spectacles and gorgeous sets that cost fortunes were made for no other purpose than to give an aesthetic thrill to the spectator. Artists were called in, technical departments established, and the pictorial representation of the photodrama was stressed in a manner totally unknown to the early producers. And that this was a correct conclusion is borne out by this fact: that a poor story beautifully produced will go over better than a strong story that outrages the eye in its presentation. Therefore to the scenario writer, saturated with the traditions of the stage and the technique of the short story, the tremendous importance of the *pictures* must be understood. In writing for the screen one must constantly hold before his mental vision the *visualized result*. And it is therefore quite essential that in doing so the scenarist must understand the *possibilities* and *limitations* of screen production. Every person who has played with amateur photography knows how much is lost in great perspectives. The reasons are stereoscopic and need not concern us here, but the fact remains that a photographic picture of great distances, howsoever awe-inspiring or distinct it may actually appear to the cameraman, is almost impossible of representation on the silver sheet. For this reason, deep-sea stuff is very difficult to film. A story writer can carry one in imagination into the illimitable terrors of the sea, giving one a thrill of expectancy in catching a first sight of a pirate ship on the horizon; whereas, on the screen, the distant ship will appear "dinky," static and disappointing. Storm stuff presents similar inhibitions. If the storm is real, the light will not be strong enough to shoot the picture. Thus it is that sea stuff is usually confined to intimate scenes on shipboard.

The golf links offer another difficult location, for here again the distances are too great to become either pictorially or dramatically interesting. Yet it is amazing the number of scenarios that come in in which dramatic episodes take place over the whole countryside. The

possibilities of the aeroplane seem dramatically pregnant to a great army of scenarists, but here again the area over which the episodes take place is too large for pictorial comprehension. The weekly news bulletin of aeroplane maneuvers ought to show the scenario writer how really tame the performances appear in the absence of stereoscopic perspective and the dramatic roar of the engines.

Appeal to Eye, Not Ear.

It might be well at this point to call attention to the dramatic loss where, in real life, the collateral arts express a major motif. If it were possible to produce pictures with the accompanying sounds, many scenes might be saved. But even though it were desirable, it is quite impossible to expect these in small suburban houses. Thus, scenes requiring music as an *essential* accompaniment should be undertaken with the understanding that when the scene is projected it will probably miss this necessary "marriage of the arts." Scenes representing quartets or individuals singing will appear flat if no music accompanies them, and may get a laugh where a tear is expected. The same applies to dancing. Flashes of dances as a mere gala background may go all right in limited footage, but should the principal character be a well-known dancer, her art will suffer in translation without the collateral use of timely music. This is best seen where the attempt has been made to reproduce intimate pictures of clog dancing.

With the recognition of the photodrama as a distinct art, the world has happily given up its insistence upon absolute realism, and it now regards the photodrama as a purely plastic representation rather than an actual realization. Thus it is that color is less sought after now than formerly, and the ordinary spectator prefers the simple black and white values of his photoplay representation, and no more misses color than he does in the tation, and no more misses color than he does in bronze

and marble statues. Only when color becomes a major motif, such as a representation of the Indian durbar or in botanical subjects, does it become essential. Therefore the scenarist must visualize his finished product in black and white color values, and not stress scenes such as carnivals and fantasmas without a full understanding that their representation on the screen will be more or less disappointing.

Limitations to Be Observed.

Another point often overlooked by scenarists who send in script that is otherwise acceptable are the physical limitations of the studio. It is true the cinema has one great advantage over the stage. It can take the spectator all over the world by simply cutting to the various scenes, and in this joyous discovery many writers have splashed in with abandon that is no doubt possible of achievement, but little recognizing the terrific expenditures necessary. Scenarios are constantly coming in in which the characters hop from the North Pole to the Equator and several times around the world. But besides losing unity of action the filming of such scenes is often prohibitive. Normal travel is of course permissible, but the scenario writer must not use the "magic carpet" to a point that renders the filming of such scenes too costly.

It is also well to remember that 85 per cent of the films are made in Los Angeles, where snow can be found for only a few months in the year, and then at great distances. This does not mean that snow pictures are necessarily inhibited, but it is just as well to know that their cost is considerable, and if the locale can be changed without doing violence to the story, it is safer to cast them in more accessible places. Suppose, for instance, that the plot is the strongest factor of the story and important action takes place in a storm. The locale of the plot may often with perfect propriety be transferred from a blizzard to winds, sand or rain. This, in fact, is what happens to many stories that are bought by the studios, the authors

of which are outraged by the transition. The greatest difficulty experienced by the short-story writers in submitting their efforts to the screen is in their unfamiliarity with cinema construction. They do not seem to understand that the motion picture has developed a technique, syntax and punctuation peculiar to itself and found in no other art. And it is most important that the scenarist should be familiar with these factors in order to write intelligent continuity. In the early days screen punctuation was practically unknown, and when the director got started on his story he did not know how to interrupt it or stop it; with the result that the action became cumulative, generally ending up in a chase or a cataclysmic stunt, and the picture finishing with a lot of scratches and blobs. But with the invention of the fade-in, dissolves, cut-backs, closeups, the iris and other mechanical devices a definite punctuation evolved. As most pictures open with an iris, let us first discuss this.

The Iris.

On the stage, when a play begins the curtain rises, first disclosing the feet, then the knees, until in the ascent the whole picture is left visible. When the scene is ended the curtain descends, and inversely the feet are the last to be seen by the audience. But by the use of the iris the screen picture opens up in the center on its point of focal interest and in ever-widening concentric circles until the picture is seen as a whole. The use of the iris, however, during the running of a picture serves another purpose. Here we see the scene contract in concentric circles from the outer edges until finally a single focal point is left. This often has a decidedly psychological import; for instance, if the scene irises out on an expression or "prop," such as a letter lying on the desk or a revolver held in the hand of a character, the spectator realizes that this focal point had been emphasized and the subject will be carried over into another scene. Again, when the curtain falls upon the stage, the spectator knows that the action is ended, and when it rises on a new scene is mentally

prepared for an intervening time lapse. The irising out and irising in on the screen produces the same punctuation. More common, however, than the iris is the use of the fade-in and fade-out where the picture as a whole, beginning from a black opacity, gradually dissolves into the scene as a whole. And when a picture fades out and then fades into another scene, the same time lapse is insinuated without the necessity of a subtitle. In other words, if we see the picture fading out on a person about to retire and then fade in on the same person arising, the time lapse title, "The next morning," is redundant and unnecessary. The difference in using the iris and the fade-out for final periods lies only in the fact that the iris can be used to emphasize a point that the director wishes to be carried over mentally into the subsequent action. A simple cut from a long shot to a closeup and back to the long shot without fading, irising or breaking with titles may be considered as practically the same as commas on the printed page. The most abused punctuation is no doubt the unintelligent use of the closeup. Intrinsically, this particular punctuation parallels the use of italics or capitalization and is intended for emphasis. For instance, in a full shot, the whole set is registered in the spectator's mind, the general action is made intelligible, and when the picture is cut to a closeup of two individuals it is because the local action has become important, but as the spectator has had the whole scene registered in his mind it becomes permissible to exclude these from the field of vision during the particular dramatic action of the emphasized characters. On the stage this is accomplished by bringing the characters forward or spot-lighting them. But the closeup of the cinema is a much better method of emphasis, for, besides excluding all extraneous action from the eye of the beholder, it also magnifies figures so that even the expressions upon the faces become intelligible. It is interesting to note that those who have been attending the pictures consecutively for years understand the punctuation without the slightest mental effort.

Picture Possibilities.

In the first part of this lecture the limitations of the films were pointed out. By now it might be well to emphasize their possibilities. One of the most amazing contributions that the art of the cinema has made is in its ability to visualize psychic manifestations, the subconscious mind and the various fantasmagoria. In this field it stands pre-eminent over all the other arts. For instance, on the stage, when retrospect is necessary, one of the characters must tell in words the things that happened previous to the opening of the drama, leaving it to the audience to visualize them in its many diverse manners. On the screen, however, if the character for a moment wishes to conjure up a vision of his youth, the picture can dissolve into a vision and let us all behold him as he was in his childhood. Even his dreams can thus be shown and thoughts made visible. In this connection pictorial subtitles often furnish, psychologically, information that might otherwise have to be shown in action. For instance, a title reading, "John was late for dinner," may show in the corner a stack of poker chips, and by association the audience realizes what delayed the wicked spouse.

Useful Examples.

We are now beginning to see an intelligent development of technique and punctuation dealing with the representation of psychic subjects. For instance, we observe the objective world about us in sharp focus, but our dreams are vague and usually out of focus. Some of the more alert directors are beginning to show the dream stuff in soft focus, so as to differentiate it from the world of reality. When a picture showing a man sitting by the fire smoking his pipe dissolves into his dream; during the few feet of transition where we observe a lap dissolve—or one picture dissolving into another—we have the elusive feeling of the vision, but after the transition into the scene of his dreams, if it is shown in hard focus, we sometimes have to pinch ourselves to recall the fact that it is

not reality, but only a dream. If, however, the whole scene of the dream is shot in soft focus, we are aware throughout its presentation that the scene is one of the imagination only. One very interesting example of the use of soft focus in recording the picture of the sub or semi-conscious mind occurred in a scene wherein a young woman had fainted. By a clever double exposure we saw the young lady lying in the foreground in sharp focus, while her surroundings were vague and indefinite. As she rose to her knees and rubbed her eyes, the indistinct shapes of light and shadow about the room gradually took on form until, at last, when consciousness had returned, she saw in distinct detail the chairs and windows, and recognition registered in her face. This was a case where the audience was permitted to share with the screen character the bewilderment of a fainting spell, and in no other art form could this phenomenon have been visualized. The same device was recently used in a picture where the husband suffered a concussion of the brain, and when the crisis passed he opened his eyes and looked up into a face that at first was a mere blur, but gradually resolved itself into the features of his wife. A closeup of what he saw was permitted the spectators. Another very interesting example of visualizing pain that had a curious psychological effect upon the audience happened in a propaganda picture wherein an Armenian girl was being tortured. She had been crucified and her captor began beating her with a cat-o'-nine-tails, but as each stroke fell upon her naked body the picture drew out of focus with each blow, until finally nothing remained of the scene but a blur, which had the effect of a terrible picture fading out through tear-dimmed eyes. The reason that these possibilities in visualizing the unobjective world have been stressed is because herein lie possibilities for the scenarist that as yet have been merely touched upon. And as the world in its spiritual sickness has become tremendously interested in psychic phenomenon the field offers a prodigious opportunity for those who wish to dramatize the spiritual and psychic side of life.

Character Development.

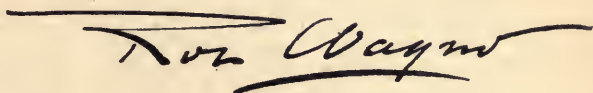
It is in the picturization of character development that the scenario writer must give his most thoughtful attention. As the average person has been brought up on the short story and the drama, it is but natural that he should think in those terms. But on the screen character must be *shown* and not *discussed*. One well-known short-story writer wrote a most indignant letter to a certain studio, in which he said: "You have shown on the screen a scene in which one of my characters enters a drawing room and deliberately kicks a dog lying before the fireplace. No such episode was in my story." "No," the scenario editor replied, "no such episode *was* in your story, for which you should express regret rather than indignation. What was in your story was several pages of descriptive matter telling what a despicable character the fellow was. I racked my brain to discover how I could, in a few feet of film in the early part of the story, register his character, and I suddenly hit upon this episode; for you must agree that anyone who would deliberately kick a beautiful sleeping dog was a despicable bounder." So, if in your story you wish to record the fact that the man is a thoughtless brute to his wife, indicate some action that can be visualized which will establish him as a rotter without resort to literary titles. For instance, if she in her kindness has slaved to set him a palatable dish, show him pushing it away from him in quiet and cruel contempt. Many stories come in wherein the plot is good but characterizations are inadequate, and it devolves upon the scenario staff to provide the necessary incidents and scenes that will establish character. A play might have a splendid plot, yet the scenarist in his artifice, believing that heroes are all good and villains entirely wicked, will render them into mere morality puppets. So the scenario editor may have to cut in a little scene showing that even the hero has a weakness and the villain a touch of merit.

Visualizing a Scenario.

If the reader is now impressed with the necessity of visualizing a scenario because of its ultimate translation into pictures, let us approach the subject of preparing his scenario for submission to a studio. It is true that most companies prefer that all script shall be submitted in the form of synopses, either brief or detailed, and adjure writers from translating their efforts into continuity form, the reason being that most of the studios have their own methods of continuity production and prefer to translate the story into screen language according to their particular intricacies. However, it behooves every screen writer to learn the language of the cinema and be able to translate his scenario into *pictures*. The writer of this lecture having been for years an illustrator, is trained to think pictorially. Nevertheless, he has found the following method of scenario writing to be productive of the best results:

He first writes a detailed synopsis of his story, in which he establishes his characters, develops his plot and tries to tell the tale with fluency. When this is finished he sets out to write it in continuity form, written in a way in which he expects the picture to be shot. But as he begins to visualize the story from the point of view of the director who is reading his continuity, he realizes that certain scenes run too long; that collateral action is necessary for something to cut to in order to break this great length; that his characterizations were developed in the literary expression, but he is failing to put it over on the screen; that his plot is not building up properly; and that the fundamental psychology of the story needs more intelligent visualization. Thus he has arrived at the end of his continuity in about the same position that the studios find themselves when they have translated the average script that comes to them into terms of the screen, and which are so upsetting to the authors when they see their scenarios projected. Now, however, having written his

story in the new art form, he re-writes in detailed synopsis form his continuity. And when he submits this detailed synopsis the studios find that they can translate it into screen technique without doing violence to his story. In fact, he has compared the continuity that the studios have prepared from his submitted scenario and was amazed to see how close it was to the continuity from which he wrote his final submission.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ron Wayne". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Above the signature is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line. Below the signature is a shorter, horizontal, slightly wavy line.

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